

On Hitting the Nail

Surgeon General Burney, by his paper in a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, has put the authority of the United States Public Health Service behind those medical researchers who blame the smoking habit for the astonishing incidence of lung cancer in American males. The weight of all existing evidence, he says, supports the hypothesis that smoking, and particularly cigarette smoking, is "the principal etiological factor."

At the same time the Surgeon General acknowledges that there has as yet been no experimental confirmation of the hypothesis. That is to say the experimenters have not up to now succeeded in producing malignant lung tumors in laboratory animals by exposing them to tobacco tars or to cigarette smoke. The evidence, therefore, remains largely statistical, but it cannot be denied that the statistics themselves are impressive and frightening. The mortalities are lowest among persons who do not smoke at all, highest among heavy smokers. The probabilities of lung cancer among cigarette smokers are three times greater than among pipe smokers, seven times greater than among cigar smokers. The reasons for this curious disparity remain in the realm of conjecture, but the most plausible conjecture is that deep inhalation "is associated almost entirely with cigarette smoking."

Even so, there are many aspects of the lung cancer phenomenon that remain deeply mysterious. One of them is the fact that the death rate has steadily risen as the death rate from tuberculosis has declined. The Surgeon General cites an English investigator who concluded that many who now die of lung cancer might, had they been born a century earlier, have died of consumption, and that predisposing genetical factors are somehow involved. At any rate, since even non-smokers do occasionally develop lung cancers, it is clear that smoking is not the only factor. Among the other strongly suspected causes is the steadily increasing pollution of the atmosphere by various industrial gases, such as smoke, the exhaust from motor vehicles and the bituminous substances used in road construction and paving.

Even more mysterious, in view of all presumed factors, is why lung cancer should now be five times commoner among men than among women, although until about a generation ago the incidence by sex was pretty much the same. But Dr. Burney, citing a study published last year, asserts that there is now "conclusive evidence that non-smoking women have about the same lung cancer death rate as non-smoking men."

As for "filter" cigarettes, which now constitute about half the national consumption, they apparently afford no real protection. Some of the tar comes through anyhow and the paper itself or the manufacturer's additives also may contain carcinogenic substances. Nevertheless Dr. Burney admits that it is at least theoretically

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Should Back Up Their Words On Smoking

Tobacco regions of the South are now getting some idea of how the cranberry regions of the North and West felt when the Department of Health, Welfare and Education made its cranberry-cancer announcement a couple of weeks ago.

This time tobacco and smoking are the targets of the strong warning by the Public Health Service that asserts evidence implicates smoking as the main cause of the rising rate of lung cancer.

The so-called "new" information on which the announcement was based has been contested by the tobacco industry which naturally does not have a disinterested viewpoint on the matter. And so far the Public Health Service has not made public this "new" information which certainly it should do. If, on the other hand, the assertions have been made on the basis of old information which already has been available, the Health Service in all fairness to the industry and to the public should frankly say so.

Reaction to the announcement by the Public Health Service was immediately reflected in falling prices of major tobacco stocks on the stock market. Further reaction probably will be shown in cigarette sales in the future.

That the announcement by the Public Health Service is damaging to the tobacco industry—from the grower to the manufacturer—there can be no doubt. And certainly the industry is well within its rights to demand that the government agency responsible for the announcement supply the proof to back up its conclusions. If no such proof exists, then this government agency has done a grave injustice to the tobacco industry.

The people of North Carolina—where the tobacco industry is the most important in the entire economy—cannot afford to remain aloof from the situation. In the long run it could have a dramatic effect on the economy of the entire state, both in manufacturing and in agriculture. In the interest of the state as a whole, government officials as well as leaders in the tobacco industry should join in the demand that the Public Health Service back up its statements or back down from them.

possible to treat tobacco "so as to eliminate the hazard of cancer." Since, notwithstanding all the warnings, few inveterate smokers are likely to abandon the habit, it seems to us that the Tobacco Research Committee, which has been so busily challenging Dr. Burney's statements, might well divert more of its effort toward discovering and perfecting such a treatment.